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SUBJECT: SPAIN: ELECTION UPDATE FEBRUARY 15

REF: A. MADRID 171
[1](#)B. MADRID 151 AND PREVIOUS

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Popular Party (PP) candidate Mariano Rajoy appears to be making a play for working class voters with messages on the economy (ref a), immigration, and public security. Some polls suggest voter participation may be slipping; virtually everyone agrees low turnout hurts President Zapatero and the socialists (PSOE) more than the PP. However, it appears most Spaniards still expect a PSOE victory. In electoral terms, we still have a long way to go until March 9, and this race remains too close to call. End summary.

Immigration -----

[1](#)2. (U) Rajoy has taken a page from Sarkozy's book, saying immigrants should be required to sign an integration contract in which they commit to respect the customs, laws, and culture of Spain; learn the language; pay taxes; and work or leave Spain. In return the government would guarantee them equal rights to Spaniards and assistance in finding a job or help in returning to their countries of origin if they could not find work. Parties of the left and pro-immigrant groups were quick to brand the proposal as extremist and discriminatory. A PP official also suggested the party would support banning the use of the veil in schools and public buildings as a way of fighting discrimination against women. There are about 4.5 million immigrants registered in Spain (roughly 10 percent of the population). The PP predicts that number will grow to eight million by 2025 if current trends continue. Minister of Interior Rubalcaba said the PP proposals had a whiff of xenophobia about them. Zapatero apologized to immigrant women for the PP's "discriminatory offenses" and in an agitated tone told a rally he would never remain silent in the face of right-wing opponents who were angry, xenophobic, macho, and homophobic.

Public Security -----

[1](#)3. (U) Rajoy unveiled February 11 a package of public security proposals including 30,000 new police, improved public security infrastructure, a tougher penal code, streamlined criminal trial procedures, and stricter parole conditions. Getting the most attention so far are his proposals to reduce the age at which a youth can face criminal charges (for serious offenses and recidivists) from 14 to 12 years, to increase penalties for serious offenders aged 16 to 18, and to toughen detention conditions for juvenile offenders. Rubalcaba was quick to point out that

under the previous PP government, there were fewer police, less spending on public security, and a higher murder rate. He described Rajoy as having been the worst Minister of Interior in the history of Spanish democracy. Left of center daily El Pais tried to undercut Rajoy's public security and immigration proposals by reporting they were conceived by Javier Fernandez Lasquetty, a close associate of former President Aznar (Aznar remains the man the left loves to hate).

Polls Remain Tight

¶4. (U) Extrapolating from relatively small nationwide telephone polls to the results in each of 52 congressional races can be misleading. Also, Spanish pollsters generally do not limit themselves to "likely voters," and they process the raw results by weighing the responses to various questions about party preference, positives or negatives of particular candidates, etc. With those caveats, a poll conducted by Metroscopia and published February 3 in the leftist daily El Pais showed the PSOE with 42 percent to the PP's 38.6 percent. Sixty percent expected the PSOE to win while only 18 percent expected a PP victory. Voter participation was predicted at 73-74 percent (it was 77.4 percent in the 2004 general election). Of those who said they voted for the PP last time, 77.3 percent said they would do so again versus 66.5 percent for the PSOE. Ranked from zero to ten, Zapatero got a 5.7 approval rating to Rajoy's 4.6. The "would never vote for" number for the PP was 40 percent; for the PSOE, it was 14 percent. Respondents overall put themselves at 4.8 on a scale from left (zero) to right (ten). Respondents put the PSOE at 4.3 on the same scale, but placed the PP at 7.0. Although 38 percent of respondents thought the overall condition of the country was good, 45 percent thought the economy was bad or very bad, 41 percent said it was going to get worse, and those polled had

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greater confidence in the ability of the PP than the PSOE to reactivate the economy (43 percent to 37 percent). The poll was based on 2,000 telephone interviews conducted nationwide between January 26-30. The margin of error was plus or minus 2.2 percent.

¶5. (U) A "flash" poll conducted by Metroscopia and published by El Pais February 10 showed the PSOE with 41.7 percent to the PP's 38.8. Fifty five percent thought the PSOE was most likely to win in March while only 17 percent said the PP was likely to do so. Of those who said they voted for the PP last time, 73.6 percent said they would do so again versus 64.1 percent for the PSOE. Ranked from zero to ten, Zapatero got a 5.5 approval rating to Rajoy's 4.4. On Rajoy's immigration proposals 56 percent chose good or very good. On Zapatero's 400 euro tax rebate, 69 percent chose good or very good. On the Spanish economy, 50 percent said it was bad or very bad, and 43 percent said their personal economic situation was good or very good. Zapatero got an approval rating of 5.5 to Rajoy's 4.4. The slight overall improvement in the PP's numbers was attributed by the pollsters to the pessimism on the economy. This poll was based on 600 telephone interviews of eligible voters conducted nationwide February 8. The margin of error was plus or minus 4.1 percent.

¶6. (SBU) Both of these polls suggest PP voters are more loyal than PSOE voters, substantiating the conventional wisdom that low turnout favors the PP. Most observers say the PSOE enters the danger zone around 70 percent (no one can say with exactitude); as turnout drops below that point, the PSOE runs an increasing risk of winning the polls and losing the election.

¶7. (SBU) A poll conducted by Sigma Dos and published by right of center El Mundo February 11-12 showed 69.7 percent of respondents thought Zapatero would reopen talks with ETA in a

second term (something Zapatero denied in a February 11 TV interview). Nevertheless, Zapatero got better marks for being able to handle ETA than Rajoy (36.0 versus 32.9 percent - in a January Sigma Dos poll Rajoy got higher marks than Zapatero). The poll showed 51.7 percent thought the country's economic situation would get worse. 79.7 percent thought Zapatero's 400 euro tax rebate was a measure to gain votes. However, Zapatero's Minister of Economy Pedro Solbes still got the highest marks for public confidence in his ability to handle the economy (36.9 percent to 23.4 percent for the PP's Manuel Pizarro). 82.5 percent agreed that the study of Spanish throughout the country should be guaranteed by law (language is a controversial topic as it relates to the Basque Country and Catalonia). This poll was based on 1,000 telephone interviews of adults conducted nationwide February 4-7. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.16 percent. We will report them for the sake of trends that might emerge, but these Sigma Dos polls in El Mundo merit caution. Although the results do not always favor Rajoy, a number of the questions seem to have a partisan slant.

18. (U) A poll conducted by IPSOS and published by conservative economic newspaper Expansion February 11 gave the PSOE 41.1 percent and the PP 39.8. It pegged voter turnout at 69-70 percent. This poll was based on 1,000 telephone interviews of conducted nationwide February 8-10. No margin of error was given.

19. (SBU) A poll conducted by the Government's Center of Sociological Investigations (CIS) and released February 15, offers some interesting, if apparently contradictory, results. It showed the PSOE getting 40.2 percent of the vote to the PP's 38.7 percent. Translated into congressional seats, this means 158-163 seats for the PSOE and 153-157 for the PP. 72.2 percent said they would vote and 12.9 percent said they would likely vote. 52.4 percent thought the PSOE would win while 15.3 percent said it would be the PP. Asked whether they wanted a different party in power after March 9, 39.8 percent said yes while 36.9 percent said no. More voters preferred Zapatero as president than Rajoy (50.4 percent to 26.2 percent). This poll was based on 18,221 personal interviews conducted between January 21 and February 14. The margin of error was plus or minus 0.74 percent. CIS generally gets high marks for its methodology and rigor.

110. (SBU) The tight polls have some people talking about the possibility that a party could win the largest number of seats in congress while not capturing the largest number of votes nationwide. Although always a theoretical possibility under the 1978 constitution, Spain has never coped with this reality (Zapatero said (when?) that he would not attempt to govern if the PSOE found itself winning the most seats but

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not the most votes). Another possibility is that a party which barely wins the most seats cannot come up with the numbers in congress to form the government (this is perhaps a greater risk for the PP, which seems to have alienated many of the smaller parties and is less likely to gain support from the Basque and Catalan parties because of its views on regional autonomy). That could open the way to the second place finisher putting together the necessary coalition and forming the government. Finally, if nobody can cobble together the necessary seats after two months of wrangling, the King would be forced to call new elections. No one is predicting any of these outcomes, but in a tight race anything could happen.

111. (SBU) To add one more complication, in a press interview last September, Zapatero was asked if he held to his 2004 campaign promise not to govern unless he got more votes than Rajoy. He replied "yes, I am a consistent person ("si, soy una persona coherente")." The next day, Rajoy made a similar commitment. If one of these candidates gets one seat more but one vote less than the other, we might see some interesting verbal gymnastics ("What I meant to say was...").

¶12. (SBU) Zapatero had an embarrassing open mike accident following a February 13 television interview with a friendly journalist. Not realizing he was on the air, Zapatero answered a question about the PSOE's private polls saying they were good, but the most convenient thing for the party was to maintain the tension. He said after the weekend (February 16-17) he would begin to "dramatize" a little. Zapatero was blasted in the conservative press for suggesting that conflict and partisanship were good for the country. We took his remarks a little differently. PSOE private polls have supposedly showed them with a significant lead for some time, but they are trying (not very effectively) to keep this under wraps for fear their voters will not turn out on March if they think this election is in the bag.

Church

¶13. (U) The Zapatero government continued to complain about statements by the Spanish Episcopal Conference which implicitly criticized the PSOE. In particular, the government was upset by criticism of its talks with ETA. The government even complained to the Vatican about the Spanish bishops. Press reports suggested the Spanish Ambassador to the Holy See was politely told by the Vatican Secretary of State that the bishops were within their rights. Perhaps calculating that a stand-off with the bishops could be used to whip up socialist turnout, PSOE Secretary of Organization Jose Blanco said that after the election, "nothing would be the same" between church and state. Blanco did not suggest a change to the 1979 accord between the government and the Holy See, but he did say the church should take definitive steps towards becoming self-financing (the Catholic Church presently receives revenue from the government). Asked about this a few days later (at an event attended by the Papal Nuncio), Zapatero said he did not know who had suggested such a thing. Reminded that it was his campaign manager, he said the possibility of renegotiating the church-state accords was always open but it would be done through dialogue and consensus. A few days later, he seemed to back away further from confrontation saying the accords could be revised but that there must be a special relationship with the Catholic Church. By Valentine's day, it looked as though Zapatero had decided to kiss and make up, going to dine with the Papal Nuncio, an event that got wide media coverage. Rajoy used the controversy to accuse Zapatero of picking fights with the bishops in order to avoid talking about the worsening economy. This issue can work at least two ways: the image of a reactionary Catholic hierarchy trying to turn back the clock could motivate PSOE voters while the image of the radical left insulting the Church could make it hard for the working class faithful to vote PSOE. Without reliable polling data, we are not yet sure which way it is cutting.

Electoral Lists Official

¶14. (U) The voluminous final electoral lists by province and party have been published and can be found on Embassy Madrid's SIPRNET site. Interestingly, there has been some buzz in Spain provoked by the keen interest here in the U.S. primaries. Some commentators have noted wistfully the difference between the fiercely democratic and transparent candidate selection process in the U.S. and the top-down, smoke-filled room process Spanish parties use. In addition, it is predicted that the law requiring gender parity may have

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little effect in terms of increasing the number of women in congress since the parties have put most of the women so far down the lists they are unlikely to win seats.

Gallardon

¶15. (U) The story of Madrid Mayor Ruiz-Gallardon's exclusion from the PP electoral lists never dies. For one reason, the left-wing media get a chance to bring it up every time Gallardon and his arch-rival, Autonomous Community of Madrid President Esperanza Aguirre, both have to show up at a public event. It also reappeared in the context of a libel suit filed by Gallardon months ago against a commentator for COPE, the Spanish Episcopal Conference radio network. Among other things, the commentator suggested Gallardon was indifferent to the victims of the Madrid training bombings (this because Gallardon opposed PP suggestions of a Zapatero government cover-up). The commentator recently called as defense witnesses Aguirre and other PP notables known to be unfriendly to Gallardon. Mercifully for the PP, the trial is set for May.

Promises

¶16. (U) Rajoy has promised an integrated law to fight climate change. Among other things, he said he would plant 500 million trees (the PSOE had promised 45 million), reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent by 2020, and invest 375 million euros annually in a natural resources defense fund. Rajoy was criticized last year for remarks suggesting he did not take global warming seriously.

¶17. (U) Zapatero announced he would extend his subsidy plan for parents to those making less than 15,000 a year or 20,000 euros in the case of large families. Currently only those making less than 11,000 euros a year are eligible. The plan pays 500 euros for each child zero to three years of age and 300 euros for those 3 to 18. The PSOE said this would extend coverage to an additional 400,000 families. The PP meanwhile is promising a plan for free dental care.

Debates

¶18. (U) After some last minute wrangling over venues, the PSOE and PP appear to have agreed that the February 25 and March 3 Zapatero-Rajoy debates will go forward.
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